

3 May 1984

NICARAGUA/
FIGHTING

WOODRUFF: There were reports of fighting today along the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica at the border crossing of Penas Blancos. There are no immediate reports of casualties. Costa Rica has no army and uses a lightly armed national guard for security, prompting concern that Costa Rica might ask the United States for military aid. Relations between Costa Rica and Nicaragua have worsened in recent weeks. The Costa Ricans reported that a Nicaraguan plane bombed a border town earlier this week. Rebels fighting the Nicaraguan government have been using Costa Rican bases in their fight against the Sandinistas.

WOODRUFF: Another mine exploded yesterday in the Nicaraguan harbor of Corinto. A fishing boat was sunk, and four sailors were injured. It was the first explosion since the CIA-backed rebels, known as contras, said last month that they had stopped their harbor-mining operation. Reporter Charles Krauss, on assignment for this program, recently visited Corinto and sent back this report on the impact of the mining operation.

KRAUSS: From a mother ship 12 miles offshore, the CIA secretly mined Nicaragua's three principal ports last February and March. By far, the worst hit was the port of Corinto. A total of eight ships were damaged in this channel, linking Corinto's harbor to the Pacific. A red buoy now pinpoints where the last ship, a Japanese freighter, was hit March 30th. The buoy serves as a warning and as a reminder. The CIA claims it stopped mining Nicaragua's ports a month ago, but unexploded mines still lurk beneath Corinto's waters. They remain a potential danger to the tankers and container ships that are Nicaragua's economic lifeline to the world. Corinto's long been a principal target of the CIA's secret war against Nicaragua's revolutionary government. That's because this port alone handled 80 to 90 percent of the country's foreign trade. The mining was part of the Reagan administration's strategy to squeeze Nicaragua's economy, the latest attempt to force the Sandinistas to cut alleged arms shipments to guerrillas in neighboring El Salvador, but that strategy ran at least partially aground last month when France, Britain and Congress condemned the mining as a violation of international law. In Corinto, life along the docks has pretty much returned to normal. The port is congested. There's plenty of work. Today Soviet, Cuban and other foreign ships are back, loading cotton, coffee, sugar, unloading fertilizer and manufactured goods. The Mesanche is a Canadian ship in port recently to offload pot ash, aid from the Canadian

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government. We asked Capt. John David if he was concerned about the mines when he docked at Corinto. JOHN DAVID (Captain, Mesange): Well, I wasn't concerned, because I didn't know about them.

KRAUSS: Well, how's that. DAVID: Well, that was quite simply because I wasn't informed. Neither by the Canadian government, nor the shipowners nor by the Nicaraguan government. Now we heard...by listening to the radio, we heard reports on local radio stations about mines in Nicaraguan ports, but we did not believe that that applied to Corinto.

KRAUSS: Had you known, would you have entered the port? DAVID: Well, that depends on a lot of things. I think I would have wanted to have a lot more information before I'd have attempted going to the port. I would have taken necessary safety measures to protect the personnel. There's a lot of things we could have done, but nothing was done, quite simply because we weren't informed.

KRAUSS: How do you feel about mining ports? DAVID: Well, as far as a ship captain goes, it's not a very good idea.

KRAUSS: We asked Capt. David to tell us about Corinto. DAVID: It's a typical Central American port--hot, sweaty, not too much to do. There's a curfew at 10 o'clock at night, but then a lot of Central American countries are like that, too.

KRAUSS: The revolution has made a fairly big campaign against prostitution, and from what you know from your crew, what's that like in Corinto? DAVID: Well, I think revolution or no revolution, it goes on just the same.

KRAUSS: One of the interesting things about Corinto is that it's not a hotbed of revolutionary fervor. Here, as elsewhere in Nicaragua, people are deeply religious. They actively participate in Catholic rituals, knowing the church has become a leading critic of the revolution. Dock workers in Corinto have refused to join the Sandinista's labor confederation, and the government has been forced to give up its campaign to end prostitution. The constant influx of foreign sailors here has to some extent diminished the impact of pro-government propaganda, but more than any other Nicaraguan city, Corinto has felt the brunt of the Reagan administration's campaign against the Sandinistas. We sensed and found growing

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anti-American feeling here. Inez Guevara works as a maid... INEZ GUEVARA: Nosotros pensamos... (Voice of Interpreter): What we think about is the great hatred the imperialists have for us.

KRAUSS: Roger Polivicini is a shipping agent... ROGER POLIVICINI (Voice of Interpreter): If this were not financed by the Reagan government, the Contras wouldn't exist, but they have so many millions financing them. GUEVARA (Voice of Interpreter): Yes, of course, we're afraid, because, you know, the rockets they use could kill us. POLIVICINI (Voice of Interpreter): This is a country at war. We have to be very vigilant, observant, sleep just a bit, then stay up the next night, because we cannot be complacent or secure. There is no security.

KRAUSS: What security there is, is provided by a single patrol boat in Corinto's harbor and several ground and air defense batteries on land, which we were not allowed to photograph. To protect shipping, the Sandinista navy has jury-rigged two fishing boats which serve as very primitive mine sweepers. They drag heavy chains along the bottom of Corinto's harbor, in a sense, fishing for dynamite. The Sandinistas claim to have exploded more than 30 of the U.S. mines this way, although they've lost two converted fishing trawlers in the process. Altogether they estimate the mining has cost Nicaragua about \$9 million, but that may have been a small price to pay. Public exposure of the CIA's role here has begun to erode congressional support for the Reagan administration's overall policy in Central America. It appears the mines may have caused more political damage to the administration than they did economic damage to the Sandinistas.